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ABSTRACT

This study examined the personal and professional experiences of African American women before, during, and after earning a graduate degree in education. An initial survey was sent to approximately 110 African American women, with questions on family background, sources of support, and deterrents to graduate study. From this group, a second survey was sent to approximately 50 individuals who had pursued or were pursuing graduate degrees in higher education. Focus groups were also conducted with individuals from the second survey group. It was found that some individuals felt a gap between the academy and the African American community, and that this may deter some African Americans from pursuing graduate study in education or other fields. They also discussed the effects of racism and sexism in their education and work experiences. The responses also indicated that these African American women pursuing graduate degrees in higher education were fiercely independent, proud, and determined. As a group, they often spoke about the importance of self-reliance but often in combination with some level of spiritual or religious commitment. (MDM)

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"Ain't I A Woman, Too?" Tracing the Experiences of African American Women in Graduate Programs in Education

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"Ain't I A Woman, Too?" Tracing the Experiences of African American Women in Graduate Programs in Education

In a recent issue of Black Issues in Higher Education (July 11, 1996), Julianne Malveaux declared that America needs more African American graduate students. In an op-ed piece titled, "Wanted: More Black Graduate Students", Malveaux argued that African Americans face several barriers to pursuing advanced degrees, and that despite the "African American historical thirst for education, there are also those who disparage 'too much' education. (p.44)"

We were intrigued by Malveaux's article because we have studied the experiences of African American women pursuing graduate degrees. As the paraphrase from Sojourner Truth in our title indicates, the challenges for African American women have always been more than just gender differences. In particular, we wanted to examine their experiences personally and professionally before, during, and after earning a graduate degree in education. We wanted to know how families as well as faculty treated them. We wanted to know how they felt about themselves. We wanted to hear from African American women themselves, what impact graduate study or a graduate degree had on their careers and on significant relationships in their lives.

Why study these issues?

In the South, the minority population is African American. In our particular state, the African American population accounts for over 30% of the total population. The flagship state university where we work has one of the highest African American student populations, as a percentage of the total student population, of any state university in the United States (Black Issues in Higher Education, May, 1996). At last report, African American students accounted for over 14 % of the total student body. The state has a number of historically black colleges and universities, both private and public, which makes this figure even more significant.

Why study African American women?

Education has traditionally been of critical interest and importance to African Americans and women in particular. In the antebellum period, there are records of African American women slaves passing snippets of teaching and learning to their own children by observing white childrens' lessons, even learning to read lips as a means of self-education. After Emancipation,

African American women were challenged to provide "race uplift" through education(Perkins, 1989; Jones, 1986). They were to teach not only children but adults as well, as most African Americans had been denied even basic literacy for generations.

Location, location, location

As in real estate, location can be critical in educational research. Because of its location in the South, graduate programs in education at our institution have enrolled a number of African American women over time. However we could find no systematic study of the experiences of African American women prior to, during, or after graduation from our graduate programs. In an attempt to chronicle the experiences of these women, we wrote a grant to fund a study of prospective, current and past graduates.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Initially, we designed and mailed two surveys to the population of African American women we could identify through institutional records. Our research plan was to follow up the surveys with focus groups. We were eager to engage participants in face-to-face discussion with each other as well as with us as we attempted to construct a picture of their lives before, during, and after their graduate degree had been achieved.

Surveys I and II

We identified some 110 women and sent them Survey I. In Survey I, we asked simple, demographic questions along with some personal questions on family background, sources of support, and deterrents to graduate study. As the surveys were returned, we determined that those women who had earned their degrees in Educational Administration were distinctly different from those who had pursued degrees in Student Personnel Services or Higher Education. We narrowed our sample population to include only those women who had or were pursuing degrees in programs related to post-secondary education.

Survey II was sent only to women pursuing degrees in post-secondary areas, approximately 50 women. We extended the introspective nature of Survey II to ask more pointed questions about race, gender, and interpersonal relationships. We then used the responses from both surveys to guide the questions we wanted to pursue in the focus groups.

Focus Groups

Our surveys were useful and valid. Through a combination of open-ended questions and demographic data, we gained a good, quantitative sense of our research population. As we anticipated, without talking directly to the women, we did not have a good grasp on how these experiences came to be understood and felt. The survey date re-confirmed our decision to use focus groups. "The focus group is a socially oriented research procedure. People are social creatures who interact with others. They are influenced by the comments of others and make decisions after listening to the advice and counsel of people around them (Krueger, 1994, p. 34)." This was critical to our research, and to understanding and interpreting the experiences of African American women. The focus group protocol also allowed for "probing", which extended a question or topic beyond the static, one-dimensional state of a questionnaire as well as "serendipitous" questions which might emerge from a vigorous exchange but which we may not have otherwise thought to include.

Focus groups were preferable to interviews. As Krueger (1994) notes, "the focus group presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because the participants are influencing and being influenced by others --- just as they do in real life (p.19)." Our key questions were comparable to the survey questions, such as "who encouraged you" and "who discouraged you" to "how has [a graduate degree] changed your perception of yourself as an African American woman?" We also pursued questions such as "do you find that [a graduate degree] influences your relationships with African American men?"

SUMMARY

One of our particular interests was to consider whether the experiences of African American women in graduate programs varies by geographic region. There may be differences between women raised in one part of the country compared to others. These differences may be accentuated by differences in race and culture. Whether graduate education programs are or should be more sensitive to these differences remains an unresolved question. It may be that a minority woman who aspires to a career which requires a graduate degree would be better served by earning her degree in another part of the country. She may learn more about herself and be

enlightened by regional differences. For some African American women, such an experience may be liberating, but for others, it might only be disconcerting and uncomfortable. A heterogeneous sample population to test these findings against African American women from the North, Midwest or West would be most interesting. We remain intrigued by the possibility of cultural differences in other areas of the country.

CONCLUSION

As Malveaux observes in her essay, "some students feel a gap between the academy and the [black] community." This may deter some African Americans from pursuing graduate study in education or other fields. In addition, family and others may express "some chagrin" at a graduate student who is "still in school." African American women in the South, a region which has lagged behind the North and West in education opportunities at all levels since the Civil War (Stetar, 1985) may experience a greater disadvantage than African American women in other regions. The social disadvantages of race and gender may be compounded in the South by a third disadvantage, culture. On the other hand, if they wish to stay in the South, the women we studied may have an advantage because they do understand and are accustomed to the values of the region where they live.

We do not have final answers to all our questions, but we do know a great deal more than we did. We have some excellent and intriguing responses to significant and important questions. By sharing our research efforts, we hope to convince others to collect similar information on other campuses as well. Comparisons across cultural and regional differences would be very interesting. Finally, we believe that the combination of survey instruments and focus groups provided us a good combination of research methods to explore this topic. Using only one or the other would have given us much more one-dimensional perspective. We would have missed subtle complexities and been unable to follow some of the threads of interpretation and understanding that we were able to pursue through the combination of methods.

References

Malveaux, Julianne "Wanted: More Black Graduate Students" Black Issues in Higher Education, July 11, 1996, p. 44

Jones, Jacqueline (1986) Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: The Experiences of Black Women from Slavery to the Present.

Perkins, Linda (1989) "The Impact of the "Cult of True Womanhood" on the Education of Black Women" in ASHE Reader on the History of Higher Education. New York, New York: Ginn Press

Stetar, Joseph M. (1985) "In Search of Direction: Southern Higher Education After the Civil War." History of Education Quarterly, 29, Fall, 1989, p. 341-367.

Selected Responses from African American Women in Higher Ed Study-

Question #5- Think about yourself for a moment. Reflect on the following questions and then answer each of them as thoughtfully and honestly as possible. There is no "right" answer, just the answer which describes how you feel.

a) As an African American, I see myself as:

I see myself as a warrior. I am always prepared for battle and I hardly ever gripe about the fact that I have to work twice as hard as my white male counterparts. It makes me stronger and I can handle things that make other people shrivel and die.

The descendant of a strong and spiritual people.

b) As a woman, I view myself as:

I feel weary. I have tackled many things successfully, but I am overwhelmed about the many different ways a woman has to balance her life. I am just getting to the place that I truly understand the double standard for women and men. When I really think about it, I can't separate the two. In most situtations, I am an African American woman, not just a woman.

One who must be all thinks to all people

c) As an African American woman, I see myself as:

As an African American woman, I feel good because my history is so colorful and my legacy so large and spiritual. I have so much to live up to. I feel good about the challenge.

Formidable

A woman in constant battles with the world, trying to stay on top

The bearer of many burdens and the encourager of much hope. Blessed with talent, drive and perseverance. First and foremost, a child of God.

Painting a picture of success and a model for others to follow

d) As a African American woman who is a graduate student or who has earned a graduate degree, I see myself as:

I am a quadruple threat. I threaten white women because I say things they cannot in the predominantly white male environment I work in. People expect it of me. Before they see me as a professional person, people expect Mammy, the rollin' her neck and eyes, finger snappin' woman; or the "knows how to tell a funny story" woman. I am whoever has the most power in a situation, but I never let people forget just how intelligent I am.

I threaten white men because they don't know what to do with me but they can't get rid of me. They are not usually fearful of what I can do in the work place but that I may be able to see through them. They can't understand why I won't bow and crape and some of them think it has

something to do with my relationship with God. Like maybe I have the inside scoop with Him or something. Plus some of the men I work with try this "honey" and "darlin' " stuff with me and it doesn't work.

I threaten non-professional African Americans. They feel like I might sell out. So with then, I become a peacemaker. I take it on as my responsibility not to make African American female housekeepers and cooks uncomfortable. I amke sure they know I am real and that I haven't forgotten that I am black. This is my responsibility and not theirs. I also try to make sure African American male housekeepers and maintainance men know that I don't like their lewd looks, gestures, and touches not because I think I'm better than they are but bceause I genuinely feel that [it is] disrespectful behavior.

Successful, blessed, encouraged, and a proud sister.